Interview with CAPT James A. Miller, MC, USNR, World War II Surgeon assigned to Base Hospital 9, Oran Algeria, conducted by Jan K. Herman, BUMED Historian, Winchester, VA, 2/12/1990[1]

Jan K. Herman: Is Winchester your hometown?

No, I was born in New Market, VA, in the Shenandoah Valley. My father's family, the Millers, came from Winchester. My father was a doctor and he had spent a lot of time in New York and Baltimore. But before I was born, he had gone back to New Market to retire. So, I was born and raised in that community.
It was my father who suggested that I apply to Johns Hopkins for medical school.

So you got your medical education at Johns Hopkins.

I went to John Hopkins Medical School for my medical degree and then had a year there at Hopkins Hospital. Then I went to Philadelphia and had 2 years under Dr. John D. Deaver, who was one of the outstanding doctors at that time in the United States. He had retired from his University of Pennsylvania professorship, but was very active. I then came here to Winchester in 1931. It was during in the Depression. Everybody said I'd have a hard time building up a practice. The older doctors weren't letting go because they needed the money. They had three or four other young men that came in, in other specialties the same time I came here. I spent a year after my Philadelphia training as a general resident here in our hospital. Things went along very well so that when I did start out on my own, it wasn't too bad.

You practiced here in Winchester until you joined the Navy?

Yes.

You are a general surgeon?

Yes. When I came here to Winchester, we had no orthopedists at all, no specialists. It must have been after the war before we had them. Yet I did a lot of orthopedics. But my background was in general surgery.

When did you join the Navy?

I joined the Naval Reserve in 1941. I put in my application in July of that year and received my commission in August 1941. But in looking back on it, I think it was because I really was upset. We would hear translations of Hitler's speeches on the radio and read about him. I just felt that if I could help just a little bit to take care of this situation, it would be something accomplished. But again, in looking back on it, I never thought there was any question when we did get in it after Pearl Harbor, it just never occurred to me that we wouldn't win. We sort of took it for granted. And yet, when we were over there in the Mediterranean area, things were going pretty rough in Italy. They didn't know whether they were going to be able to run the Germans out of Italy or not. Then, of course, the Christmas battles in Normandy or in France looked pretty grim. Again, it was just no thought in our minds, as I can recall, that we wouldn't win. Then once we got them taken care of, it seemed to be rather a small matter to take care of the Japs, although they were pretty tough. But that was sort of the feeling. I guess

[1] Dr. Miller died on 3 November 1991.

the reason I went in was more or less as I expressed it. But, I was fortunate in getting a LCDR's commission. I think I was 37 at that time. And I got the commission and then they called me to active duty in January 1942 and gave me duty at the Navy Yard dispensary in Washington. I was there for over a year. During that time, my wife's father was quite ill and we could get back and forth so that she could see him, and he did die while I was there in Washington. The next duty I was given after a little over a year in Washington was at the Norfolk Naval Hospital, which, in those days, was considered, I think, one of the better general hospitals. I was there until I was ordered to join this group that went overseas called Glen-57. We weren't told where we were going.

When was that?

It was in the latter part of July 1943.

How did it get the name Glen-57?

It was just a name or a term they used, I think, to keep it secret, rather than calling it a mobile or base hospital. But, the thing that really gave us a lot of fun was when we finally got to New York after about 2 weeks of waiting around in Norfolk. When we got to New York, they put us on a barge and took us down the Hudson River, where we thought everybody--all these spies--are going to see us going down the river. We were just sitting on our gear on the barge. Then we went on down to Bayonne and were put aboard a very nice Navy supply ship, the Tarazed (AF-13), which took us across the Atlantic in what was said to be one of the biggest convoys that had gone across.[2] There were four of us in the cabin I was assigned. There were bunks. The first three of us got in the cabin and put our steamer trunks under the bunks and we thought we had plenty of room until the fourth one of us showed up with a great big trunk. After that we could hardly move. All the personnel for our whole hospital were on this one ship, which included about 300 corpsmen. We officers had the cabins to sleep in; the others had to string up their hammocks. I remember feeling pretty sorry for some of them being so crowded.

We woke up the morning after the ship got underway and right in front of us was this great, big battleship, I don't recall the name. But it was big; it was one of the older battleships. We thought, "Gee, we're safe enough." But, then we realized that battleships weren't really that good at taking care of submarines. So, we weren't quite as easy about it as we had first thought. We had one or two days with rough seas but for the most part, the weather was beautiful and the water was smooth. On the outside of the convoy were the destroyers. We moved down the Atlantic coast. We knew we were still close to the coast even though we couldn't see it because we were covered by airplanes looking for submarines. After the crossing we began seeing planes flying out from the African coast to cover us.

This convoy had a lot of Army personnel they were being transporting across for the invasion of Italy.

That was 1943. We landed September 3, 1943 in Oran.

How long was the voyage?

2

On 21 Aug 1943, Tarazed weighed anchor departed Norfolk for North Africa, arriving at Mers el Kebir on 2 Sep. After calling at Bizerte and Algiers, she returned to the U.S.

It took us about 9 days from Bayonne, NJ to North Africa.

What kind of equipment did you take with you?

We had no idea what it was going to be like. Maybe at least two-thirds of the medical staff assigned to Glen-57 had met in Norfolk. We knew each other before we sailed and knew that we were going to set up a Navy hospital.

Were they mostly GPs [general practitioners] or did you have specialties? You yourself were a surgeon.

Yes, there were some specialists. That had an orthopedist who worked under me. I was chief of surgery. We had, of course, a man trained in X-ray. We had a medical internist from Philadelphia. I must say that the group they put together was easy to work with and we thought quite efficient.

We pulled into Oran, actually Mers el Kebir, just a little outside of Oran, on the second of September. Right beside our pier, they were loading soldiers to go to Italy. The thing that impressed us was how tough these fellows looked. They had been training in Patton's army, down in the semi-desert. They weren't way down in the sandy desert. But, it had been a hot summer and they were training, and they just looked tough. It looked to us, as we'd see them going up the gangway, that anyone that got in front of them was going to catch it. Of course, it turned out that they were a tough organization.

We were assigned to other Navy receiving stations, small craft landing stations and what-not. Our hospital had not even been started when we landed. We heard that the Seabees and Italian prisoners were starting to build the hospital in a wheatfield about five miles out of Oran. But, until that was set up, we were parcelled out to various hospitals. I was sent to a 105th station Army hospital that was set up in Oran in a girls' school. I was there with a group of doctors, medical staff, that had come over from Atlanta in the same convoy in which we came. They had also been pushed into this station hospital just temporarily until they were set up. So, I got acquainted with a good many of the Atlanta doctors. We'd play poker and spend the time.

CAPT Tyler would come by and pick me up at this hospital and take me out to the site of the new hospital so I could see it as they put up the quonset huts.

Was CAPT Tyler the commanding officer of the new hospital?

Yes, he was an M.D. and CO of the base hospital. He was in his upper 50's and looked elderly to us. He had volunteered and had gotten into the Navy before World War I. So, he was an old Navy doctor from way back. We talked about the old man but when he got on the tennis court, he could take care of most of us without any trouble. He was pretty fit.

Do you recall his first name?

Yes. It was CAPT George Tyler. He would take us out to the site and we'd make suggestions where we thought they had been needed. But, then after about two weeks of that, one day he came by and he said, "I've got bad news for you. We just received orders from Washington that we are to stop work on the hospital." We had heard some scuttlebutt to that effect, but this was the real thing. And for four days they did nothing and then low and behold they started in again and finished the job.

Then we were moved into the new hospital to one of the quonset huts for our quarters. It was really quite comical in thinking about it. Here it was, in the middle of a wheatfield. The

roads had not been treated; they were just mud. The Seabees were trying to finish up this hut. They knew we were supposed to move in. It was raining; it was cold; it was sleeting. It was cold enough to snow but we never saw any snow. I think it was the worst day, weatherwise, that we had. The Seabees were working, trying to wire the hut and put up the stove. We had some colored mess boys that were attached to the hospital. They were assigned to clean this hut and they were trying to clean the floor. The painters were trying to paint the interior. And we moved in, four of us, with all our gear. But, I did recall that we had a real good night sleep on those cots. We really enjoyed it. This was in the early part of November. We commissioned the hospital on 19 November 1943. I think they took 30 patients the day the hospital was commissioned.

Where did those first patients come from?

They came from Army hospitals. There must have been a dozen Army hospitals in the Oran area at that time. So why did we need a Navy hospital? The Navy was sending their patients to the Army. When an Army hospital would get orders to on to Italy or Sicily, or wherever, they'd take the Navy boys with them. They said that it was a very difficult task keeping track of the Navy boys who were in the Army hospitals. That was probably the main reason. Another reason was they anticipated that the Army would be less and less in that area and that the Navy would still be there. The port was considered to be one of the best ports in the Mediterranean.

Do you recall the first batch of patients you treated?

I helped to get them settled. We didn't have our full staff there yet. As I recall, some of them had had surgery and were convalescent. The object of our hospital was to treat patients who could recover in 4 to 6 weeks and that would not have to be sent back to the states. I can't recall specifically, but I think it was close to Thanksgiving before we got our operating room started usefully. I thought we had unusually good corpsmen assigned to our hospital. It was sort of fun helping to set it up. I wrote to my wife in one of the letters saying, "I learned more about hospital equipment in those few weeks than I had ever had before."

I recall that dust storms were pretty bad. But, somehow the Seabees were able to seal those operating room huts tight enough that, as far as I can remember, the dust was not a great problem inside. But it was in other places.

Do you recall the layout of the hospital? How many buildings were there all together?

There were about a hundred quonset huts. I've got a picture of layout. I'll show them to you. The roads were oiled and graveled and finally, as time went on, they had some boardwalks up through the main part of the hospital. After a while it wasn't bad getting around at all. The patients that came in were so happy. To begin with, they were in a hut instead of a tent. It was beginning to get cold at night. The winter was rough in the tents of the Army hospitals. For us, in the quonset huts, with a stove--with a space heater--it was very pleasant. The patients that came from these Army hospitals were just tickled to death with the set-up.

The food was also considered to be better. The Navy took care of us pretty well. They had supply boats that would bring fresh vegetables in. We'd occasionally get low on fresh foods, but not for very long. Every once and awhile I review these letters that I wrote to my wife. I'd say, "Our ship has come in." And what we meant by our ship coming in, was that we would put

in an order for a case of bourbon whiskey and about 3 months later it would come in on some ship. And so, this ship would come in every once and awhile. Another thing in rereading the letters, I just thought anybody that would read this who didn't know me, would think I was a pretty gay individual. But, that was sort of part of the living over there. In the hot weather, we were able to get beer.

How did you normally pass the time?

We'd get up early. They had double daylight savings time in the spring, summer, and fall, but not in the winter; they'd go back to single daylight savings time. We'd get up about the time the sun was coming up and have our breakfast at the officers' mess. Then we'd start our rounds, operations, and what-not. We were usually pretty well finished by one o'clock. At first it was a little difficult to fill in the afternoon and evening. But, it wasn't too long before CAPT Tyler had a few tennis courts made. He was, as I mentioned before, quite a tennis player. I hadn't played much since college, but I played a lot over there. We'd sit around and smoke a lot. We could get cigarettes for 50 cents a carton. We'd smoke and maybe have a "high ball" or something in the evening while we were playing bridge or poker. I began to get a little chest pain. I went to CAPT Tyler and told him about this. He said, "Well, Jim we'll check you out." He told me that everything seemed fine as far as they could tell from the electrocardiogram and the clinical examination. He said, "Jim, stop smoking and keep on with your tennis." I did and the pain disappeared. I figured that I was sensitive to nicotine and it was beginning to give me a little cardiac pain. But anyhow, we'd play tennis in the afternoon. We'd watch baseball games. They put up a large recreation hut and we had movies. We'd go to the movies fairly often at night.

I think we had more of a social life than a lot of the officers, certainly than a lot of the men. We had made friends with a lot of these different Army groups. They would invite us to some of their parties and they had an officers' club in Oran we could go to; we didn't go very often. But we would go to these Army hospital parties and enjoy that. So, the days would go pretty much the same.

What kind of surgical cases did you handle there?

We handled all kinds of acute cases, like acute appendicitis or trauma cases. Some of the worst cases we had to handle were not war casualties but were due to accidents. A Navy truck loaded with boys, going to a movie or something. They'd be spilled out down into a ravine or something. We had three of those situations, with as many as 40 injured people. Some of them were pretty badly injured. We had a few deaths from head injuries due to these upsets. But, getting back to the type of surgical cases we had, it was more or less whatever would be at a station hospital or community hospital in the States. Some of the things that looked liked they were going to take a long recovery period, we would try to get them transported back to the States. In going over the list of things, it really was diverse. We had quite a lot of different things to take care of.

You were kind of a community hospital?

Yes, that's right. The port of Oran the big supply port for all of the Mediterranean action. I remember one Navy boy that had his knee torn off at the knee by a cable. Fortunately, we didn't have too many of that kind. One instance I do remember very well. I had volunteered to go with a group of Navy corpsmen that were being sent to Bizerte, which was about a 3-day trip

on the little French train. We were loaded in these "40 or 8" cars. They call them "40 or 8" because each car would carry 40 men or 8 horses. As soon as the train would stop; it would stop and go on a siding to wait for some train to come the other way. A lot of the time was spent that way and that's why it took three days. The corpsmen would get out of their cars and Arabs would come running from all directions wanting to buy things or sell them things. One of the boys had his thumb down over one of the round bumpers between the cars. When the cars would come together these big, round nine or 10-inch bumpers would smash together. This fellow had his hand down on this thing and it flattened out his thumb as flat as a piece of paper. The corpsmen who was assigned to the group brought him to me. I amputated that flattened thumb right there on the train.

What happened when you finally got to Bizerte?

That was interesting too. I asked the senior medical officer there at Bizerte if I could go down to Tunis. And he said, "Yes, I think we can arrange for a driver and you can go and spend the day. Go and see the sites." So we started down there and we had to cross a small body of water. The Army guard stationed there said, "Sorry, you can't come in. We've quarantined the city of Tunis because of the plague." We were a little disappointed. I went back to Bizerte and told the senior medical officer what the story was. He said, "Oh, I can arrange for you to get into Tunis. We need to send an inspector down there." So, I got my trip to Tunis and saw the old Carthage ruins. They flew me back to Oran the next day. So I saw a little bit of what was there. We didn't spend too much time in the city although I did see some of it.

I also had the opportunity to go to Casablanca, which was not as far as Bizerte. I went with a group of Navy men. The Army lieutenant in charge said, "Well, they're all just box cars. We don't want you to have to spend 2 or 3 days in a box car with 20-some sailors. We'll put a passenger car on the train for you." Sure enough, the engine brought a car and hooked it up. It had seats that opposed each other, little cubicals. I think there were maybe eight cubicals. And I ended up having one of them for myself. It made it much more comfortable for me. Subsequently, I also did a little sightseeing in Algiers. But the best trip I had was down in the Sahara Desert. We organized a group of seven to take a trip 400 miles down into the Sahara. That was so different from the rest of the country.

What do you remember about it? How did you get down there?

They gave us an ambulance. We hooked a trailer behind the ambulance in which we carried all the gasoline and some other supplies. We also had a car that took most of us. Five of us would ride in the car part of the time and then two of us in the ambulance. The man that had the car was a Swiss who was the inspector of Italian prisoner camps. He wanted to make a trip to the desert, where some of these camps were. Then CAPT Tyler decided that the trip sounded too good for him to miss, so he signed on. We had seven of us and the two vehicles and the trailer and that's the way we got down there.

Was it 400 miles one way?

Yes, 400 miles. The sand dunes were beautiful...their color and shapes. You can't appreciate them unless you see them. We were entertained at the French Army hospital and then the Foreign Legion entertained us for 2 nights. In those days, the Foreign Legion was still considered pretty important to hold the Arabs in check. In fact, when we went to New York, and before we boarded the Tarazed, we were issued .45 caliber pistols. It was unusual and we couldn't understand quite why because Navy and Army medical personnel are supposed to be

noncombatants. Yet, I think it was because of the Arab problem. But there was no Arab problem after we got in the war. But maybe that was one reason why we all were given these Navy 45s. I put mine in my locker. I took it out once to practice a little, I think. But, I never kept it where I could use it. We never had any fear. We'd get in a jeep by ourselves, drive through the North Africa countryside, come back late at night, we just didn't seem to have any fear.

You were certainly well outside of any combat areas at that time.
Oh, yes. I never went to a combat area.

What was the official excuse for going to the Sahara?
It was purely R and R. From the time I landed there, I knew that wanted to see it but we couldn't get it organized until just before Christmas of '44. Then we took this 10-day trip into the Sahara. I got one more R and R. I flew to Naples and Rome in mid-April of '45. They sent the chaplain, who was Catholic, and me and two of the nurses. The Army nurse situation is sort of interesting too. We'd set up our hospital, as said, in November of '43. I think about the last of January of '44, CAPT Tyler came to me one day and said, "I hear they're going to send us 25 nurses." And he was sort of upset about it because we thought we had a pretty good set up. He was concerned that having 25 females would cause problems.

These would have been Navy nurses.
Yes. They did help and I'm sure the patients appreciated having their expertise. But the corpsmen were doing a good job. My operating room seemed to be working well with corpsmen. But they sent the nurses and we had to assign them. I had one in the operating room, had one giving anesthesia and then, of course, they were scattered around taking care of patients throughout the hospital. One interesting complication I remember was that one of the nurses fell in love with one of the corpsmen. Well, she was an officer and he was a corpsman. CAPT Tyler worried about it and finally he figured out a way they could see each other in a little privacy without breaking any of the rules. But, it caused him a little concern for awhile. Of course, he was the CO. I don't know that he had any other real problems with them.

After the nurses arrival then, they were pretty well integrated into the operation so Tyler's apprehensions were really unfounded?
That's right. I'm sure they elevated the nursing care side of the hospital. We got along with them very very well.

What happened when you went to Naples?
The morning that I was leaving, they drove me out to the airport, where I learned that President Roosevelt had died. When we got to Naples, we stayed in a nice hotel there. We were then assigned a jeep and a driver to take us to Rome, where we had 2 days. From there we went back to Naples and then to Oran. It was a very nice trip.

What condition was Naples in?
Naples was not too bad. When the Germans took over, they had put everything on the bottom to make it useless, but that had all been cleared and the harbor was being used right along for our supply purposes. The hotel was very comfortable. The Navy really treated us right.

You were a LCDR at this time?

I was LCDR when I got overseas. But one day in March of '44, I was doing an operation and CAPT Tyler came in with the mask on and his cap and gown. I knew something had happened. And he came in and he said, "Jim, I want to be the first to congratulate you. You are now a commander." That was in February of '44.

When you were on your liberty in Naples, that was about the time President Roosevelt died. What kind of reaction was there at that time?

People were pretty shocked and wondering how the new President, Truman, was going to work out. But I don't think, at least at my level, that anyone thought that it would interfere in any with the war. As I recall, they felt that no one person was going to stop that.

You were about ready to go home then?

Yes. We had passed our 18 months and we were all very anxious to get away. Some of the men were really building up quite a bit of tension about it. One of the doctors, I recall, his wife had become quite nervous about looking after her family and his family in Philadelphia. And she almost threatened to commit suicide. Of course, that made him tremendously concerned to get back. And he was released just a few days before I was. I was getting homesick but I had no real reason for rushing it, other than that I had felt that I put in my 18 months which were sort of customary in overseas duty.

Did you take a troop ship back?

No. They flew us back nonstop to Newfoundland, where we stopped to refuel and then to the Naval Air Station in southern Maryland [Patuxent River]. And from there to Washington. I got my new assignment and then took a bus for Winchester. I had 15 days leave and then went on to Norfolk. There I was assigned to the dispensary. They called it a dispensary, but really it was a hospital at the Naval Operating Base in Norfolk. Thanksgiving came along and I was detached from active duty. I got home before Thanksgiving in November 1945. A day or two after I got home, I was elevated to CAPT.

You did alright.

Yes, I had my four stripes. It just worked out that I got in early enough to get on the early promotion list.

You were a pretty young captain.

I was 40 years old.

So, then you ended up practicing right here in Winchester?
Did you ever in that time or after the war keep up with any of your comrades from the Glen-57? Did you all stay together as a group the whole time in North Africa?

No. They would come and go. They'd use us a sort of a receiving station for doctors. Whenever there was a push going on somewhere and they needed a few doctors, they'd pull them out of our hospital. But, CAPT Tyler could nearly always signify who he could best do without. So our central corps was never moved from the time until I left. But, the others would come and go.

Was he still there when you left?

Yes, he was. He was there for a month, I think, after I left. I kept in touch with CAPT Tyler. He was born and raised in Virginia. Then after he got out of the Navy shortly after the war was over, he settled in Staunton, VA. I used to see him every once in awhile, but we could never find out just what happened to Base Hospital 9 when we left.